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Savannah District

NEWS RELEASE

Memorial Day Holiday and Summer Safety on Hartwell, Russell and Thurmond Lakes

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SAVANNAH, GA. - The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials who manage Hartwell, Richard B. Russell, and J. Strom Thurmond Lakes urge visitors to be careful in and on the water during the upcoming Memorial Day Weekend and throughout the remainder of the summer recreation season.

All camping areas and picnic sites are open and Corps officials expect heavy Memorial Day weekend crowds at these areas. A number of boat ramps at Hartwell and J. Strom Thurmond lakes have been closed due to the low lake levels. Information on boat ramp closing/opening, current lake levels and projections, can be found at the Corps' website at www.sas.usace.army.mil.

Information can also be obtained by calling the appropriate lake office: Hartwell Lake - 888-893-0678, Richard B. Russell Lake - 800-944-7207, J. Strom Thurmond Lake - 800-533-3478.

"Memorial Day weekend is one of the busiest weekends on the lakes," said Tanya Grant, Park Ranger at Hartwell Lake. "For many people, it is the first opportunity of the year to get the boat out of dry dock and onto the water. We urge boaters to check their boats carefully to make sure they are in good working order and check all safety equipment, especially life jackets, which may have been misplaced or damaged over the winter. It is also every boater's responsibility to know and understand the state boating laws before getting out on the water."

"Unfortunately, it is all too common for drownings to occur on area lakes, especially on holiday weekends," Ranger Grant said. "We know that people are coming out to the lake to have fun and relax but they still need to think about safety". Whether boating or spending the day picnicking and swimming in one of the many lakeside parks, if you plan on being in or near the water, the most important thing you should do is bring a life jacket for you and everyone in your family or group and wear it.

The most common causes for drowning on Corps lakes are overestimating one's swimming ability and falling from the boat. Ranger Grant said, "Area lakes are not like backyard pools – water depths vary, drop-offs, holes, rocks and tree stumps may exist, and visibility into the water is limited. Plus you have the added factors of wind and wave action. Just because you and the kids can swim in a pool, doesn't mean that you can swim well in a lake under these conditions."

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Don't be tempted to swim across coves or out to an island, buoy, boat, or a raft or toy that has drifted away. Distances across water are difficult to estimate and are usually much further than they appear. Falls from boats are very dangerous but wearing a life jacket will significantly increase your chance of survival even if you are injured. The bottom line is be prepared by wearing your life jacket.

The majority of drownings happen quickly and silently; a child can drown in less than 20 seconds and an adult in less than a minute. It is estimated that 90 percent of drownings could have been prevented if the victims had been wearing a life jacket.

Low lake levels, due to the extended drought, continue in area lakes. There is still plenty of water for recreation but Corps officials urge everyone to use an extra degree of caution and common sense.

Memorial Day weekend visitors will find Hartwell Lake at 651.7 ft. below full pool, or 8 ¼ ft. down from guide curve. J. Strom Thurmond Lake is projected to be at 321.7 ft. below full pool, or 8.3 ft. down from guide curve. Richard B. Russell Lake will be at 473.7 ft. below full pool, or 1 ½ ft. down from guide curve.

Boaters and skiers are encouraged to stay within the marked navigational channels and to be on the lookout for exposed or barely submerged hazards such as shoals, rocks, and tree stumps as well as shallow areas. Park rangers periodically inspect the main channel and routes from public boat ramps to the main channel for hazards. New hazards found are marked with orange basketball-sized buoys. Hazards outside the main channel or routes from private ramps and docks to the main channel are not marked.

Swimmers are warned against swimming in unfamiliar areas because of hidden hazards such as stumps, holes and debris. Swimmers should never swim alone or in remote areas of the lakes. Water skiers should have a responsible driver and spotter, and should stick to marked channels, and be on the lookout for exposed or barely submerged hazards and shallows.

Visitors should use extreme caution when walking or wading along the shoreline or other low areas created by the present water conditions. Officials have seen an increase of people walking and wading out to areas such as shoals and islands. Walking to these areas can be hazardous - the lake bottom can be extremely slippery and hidden drop-offs or holes may be present. Also, water depth and the distance across water are often very deceiving, often being deeper and further than they appear.

For more information, contact the appropriate lake office: Hartwell Lake - 888-893-0678, Richard B. Russell Lake - 800-944-7207, J. Strom Thurmond Lake - 800-533-3478.